

Session 4: Prophetic Voices of Our UU Ancestors

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Session Metadata	
Session	4
Title	Prophetic Voices of Our UU Ancestors
UU Source	Prophetic Women and Men
Unit	2nd Source: Prophetic Women and Men
Head / Hands / Heart	Head
Has Exercise	No
Has Ritual	No
Has Spiritual Practice Presentation	No
Special Blocks	None

Preparation

Email to Participants

It was wonderful to hear everyone's spiritual histories at our last session! Keep being the theologian of your own life, keep doing your spiritual practice, and carry that ever-deepening "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder" forward into our reflections about the next UU source:



Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

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Prophetic people. Words and deeds. Justice, compassion, love. There is much here to think about!

At our next session on [date], we'll hear the prophetic voices of some of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors. You'll find highlights of Unitarian and Universalist history and many options to extend your reading. The list below is long, so choose one (or more) from each section. The goal is your reflection on our heritage, rather than feeling the need to read or view every piece in this extensive collection.

Unitarian and Universalist History

- A 2021 UUA Brochure of [Values in our Unitarian and Universalist history](#).
- [Mapping the Unitarian Universalist Global Story](#).
- The very short "[Universalism in America](#)" section of this online pamphlet.

Unitarians

We'll learn about Francis David and Michael Servetus, two Unitarian heretics from the time of the Inquisition and Reformation. We'll also be introduced to the remarkable women of the Iowa Sisterhood, a group of Unitarian women ministers from the late 1800s; the persistence of Ethelred Brown, a Unitarian minister from Jamaica; and Frances Ellen Harper, an abolitionist and women's rights activist and writer. Also highlighted is a sermon by Rev. Jen Crow, UU Wellspring's founder.

16th Century Unitarians

- [Video history](#) of Michael Servetus (6 min)
- Francis David video "[A Moment in History](#)," (2008, 6 1/2 min)
- "[What Would Francis David Do?](#)" (PDF) "[What Would Francis Do?](#)" (Audio Recording) by Rev. Kelly Dignan, a humorously presented overview of Francis David and the 450 year old [Edict of Torda](#) at UU Boulder, 2018. (20 min). [Sermon text included by permission](#).

19th and 20th Century Unitarians

- A description of the [Iowa Sisterhood](#) and a short introduction to two of its leaders, [Eleanor Elizabeth Gordon](#) and [Mary Augusta Safford](#).
- "[We Are All Bound Up Together: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper](#)" by Kenny Wiley. Harper fought for abolition and women's rights as a gifted writer and activist.

- [“Egbert Ethelred Brown Papers”](#) 1914-1956. NY Public Library Archives. Optional Extension: Learn more about [**Ethelred Brown’s**](#) pathway to Unitarian Ministry on pp 50-52 and 64-68 of Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison Reed’s *Darkening the Doorways*, which would be an excellent full read to understand the historical role of important UU leaders of color.
- [**Sophia Lyon Fahs**](#) was a key contributor to Unitarian religious education and she was ordained in 1957 in “recognition of her lifetime contribution to the liberal religious movement.”

Universalists

The beauty of our Universalist heritage is that God loves all of us. The early Universalists were also Protestants and differed from their neighbors primarily in their belief that God’s love will lead to eternal salvation for all (give or take, with some controversy about exactly how this would happen). You didn’t need to be chosen, blessed, or act in a certain manner, but rather you were loved and therefore saved. We honor this as one of the places where UUism emerged.

The Bible may at times hold inspiration, beauty, as well as challenges for Unitarian Universalists. Early Universalists upheld the Bible as prophetic and read the Bible to say that God is a loving God, providing salvation to all. While it is true that the Bible has been used to justify shame and violence over the centuries, our Universalist heritage shows us there is another way: the God of radical, inclusive love.

19th and 20th Century Universalists

- [“Christian Charity: A Doctrinal Sermon for Universalists”](#) (Try for the first 2-3 pages-this is a historical sermon from 1872.)
- Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore preaches on Universalism through the story of Thomas Potter, John Murray and Judith Murray in [“What of Thomas Potter?”](#), at First UU Houston in 2020. (start at 20:54 to view photos of the Thomas Potter Chapel with piano music by Mark Vogel. Sermon begins at 23 min and ends at 37:40)
- [“Why Universalism?”](#) by Rev. Carl Gregg touches on Universalist ancestors John and Judith Murray, Hosea Ballou, Clara Barton and several early presidents in their interactions with John Murray.
- [“In Cupped Hands”](#) by Rev. Jen Crow (21 minutes). This enjoyable sermon lifts up Universalism in our lives today.

Also, in preparation for our next gathering, **please reflect on these questions:**

- Which prophetic voice(s) from the readings was most inspiring or interesting to you? Why? What lessons does their life still teach?
- What did these Unitarian ancestors gain by telling the truth no matter what? What did they lose? Does being a prophetic voice always come with such a high price to pay?
- Choose a quote from the Universalist tradition, such as “Love the hell out of this world?” from Rev. Gregg’s text and reflect on how it resonates with your life.

- The Rev. Dr. Fenimore asks if Unitarian Universalist are living Universalist principles of embracing everyone. What are your thoughts?
- How are these ancestral voices affecting your journey to live a life of meaning?

OPTIONAL: If you are interested and have time to learn more about Unitarian Universalist history in the United States, a very accessible book is Rev. John Buehren's *Unitarians and Universalists in America* or reviewing a broader history, visit the [UUA Unitarian and Universalist history website](#) and the [booklist](#) of the Unitarian and Universalist Historical Society.

And if you are still intrigued by UU history, one extensive resource is the [Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography](#). You may find the readings and videos in this section too extensive for this session.

I look forward to seeing you all!

Session Plan

Chalice Lighting and Silence

Our opening words are from the Gospel of Thomas:

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Today's music is "[Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings."](#)

Let's take a few minutes of silence to bring ourselves fully into this circle.

Check-In

What are you carrying in your heart tonight? How is your spiritual practice or spiritual companionship going?

Covenant Review

Use whatever process your group has established to stay current with the covenant.

Is there anything about the covenant that we should address?

Reflection

For this session, we'll move from our personal spiritual journeys to the journeys of our Unitarian ancestors, and from the first source to the second. The second source states that UUs draw religious inspiration from:

“Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

UUA

The history of both Unitarianism and Universalism is filled with prophetic voices! But before we turn to our reflection questions, let's talk a little about Unitarian history.

What threads did you notice in the readings? What surprised you?

Note to Facilitators: Although this is not meant to be a “history lesson,” participants can develop a basic understanding of why people such as Michael Servetus and Francis David are such important prophetic voices from Unitarian history. Often, people understand how radical the Iowa Sisterhood was, but sometimes have a harder time understanding how radical the idea of Unitarianism was during the Reformation.

Also ask some of the following questions:

- Which prophetic voice(s) from the readings was most inspiring or interesting to you? Why? What lessons does their life still teach?
- What did these Unitarian ancestors gain by telling the truth no matter what? What did they lose? Does being a prophetic voice always come with such a high price to pay?
- Choose a quote from the Universalist tradition, such as “Love the hell out of this world?” from Rev. Gregg’s text and reflect on how it resonates with your life.
- The Rev. Dr. Fenimore asks if Unitarian Universalist are living Universalist principles of embracing everyone. What are your thoughts?
- How are these ancestral voices affecting your journey to live a life of meaning?

Some possible main ideas to convey:

- **The Nicene Creed** became a doctrinal statement of belief in 325 AD. This became the official Christian creed; anyone who lived in regions where Christianity reigned and who disagreed with the Nicene Creed could be labeled a heretic — a label that could be punishable by death.
- **Michael Servetus** studied the New Testament and found there was no proof of the Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Thus he believed in a Unitarian (not trinitarian) God. As a Unitarian, he believed Jesus was God’s human son, not a part of the Trinity.
- By doing so, **Servetus** brought his own intellect to bear on religious ideas. He questioned religious authorities and changed the course of the Reformation with his thinking and

writing.

- Like Servetus, **Francis David** did not believe religious doctrines were infallible and unchanging. He modeled open conversations about religious beliefs and helped to convince King John Sigismund to issue the first broad decree of religious freedom in Europe (the Edict of Torda, 1568). Francis David is credited with the phrase, “We need not think alike to love alike.”
- Both **Servetus** and **David** were convicted of heresy and became martyrs for their beliefs.
- **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper** was a household name in the 19th century and published the first short story by an African American woman. She was also an activist, fighting for the rights of women and the rights of Black Americans. The first symposium held by Black Lives UU (BLUU) was named in her honor.
- At the same time, don't let the amazing women of the **Iowa Sisterhood** get overshadowed by the historical drama of heresy and martyrs. You might bring up the idea that **Mary Augusta Safford** worked to help her congregations be the kind of religious communities in which individuals could evolve together “in the spirit of love and helpfulness.” This prophetic imperative from the 1800s to fill our congregations with compassion and connection impacts lives even today.

So What?

How does this reflection relate to your spiritual journey? What are you inspired or challenged to do next?

Gratitude and Closing

Have everyone focus on the chalice. Each person, as moved, says one or two words about something from this session for which they are grateful or how they are feeling in this moment. After everyone has said a word, close with a brief statement of thanks and appreciation.

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-27 23:54:10 CET by Rev. Sean Neil-Barron

Updated 2026-03-27 23:58:51 CET by Rev. Sean Neil-Barron